

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

April 8, 2003

The Honorable Tommy Thompson
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Thompson:

We are writing to express our concerns on several major issues relating to the Head Start program in this year's reauthorization.

Ensuring that our youngest children are equipped early in life with the skills necessary to succeed in school is a top priority, and effective experiences from birth through age 5 are a major part of that preparation. Head Start provides over 900,000 children with the needed skills to prepare them for school and later success in life.

We are deeply concerned, however, about the future of Head Start in light of the Administration's proposal to convert Head Start into a state block grant program by giving Governors broad authority to administer Head Start dollars and services. We share your goal of improving and expanding existing early learning opportunities in the states, but accomplishing that objective must not come at the expense of dismantling the federal commitment to Head Start.

Allowing states to funnel Head Start funds to other state programs will undeniably lead to a weakening of the program's quality. The block grant proposal assumes that states are in a position to continue Head Start's comprehensive level of services. But shrinking state budgets have already begun to compromise the quality and accessibility of pre-kindergarten programs. A number of states have cut or even eliminated funding used to supplement Head Start. The proposed maintenance of effort provisions alone would threaten to dilute the current high quality of Head Start services. Without additional resources, Head Start's ability to prepare children for school will be undermined, not enhanced.

We urge you to consider a more productive role for states in Head Start that will encourage greater support and collaboration for the good of Head Start children and families. Head Start programs already have great flexibility to cooperate with other state and local early education programs. Such partnerships with other early childhood services, including local school systems and child care providers, should be encouraged. But a block grant would dismantle Head Start, and deny needed services to the nearly one million children enrolled in the program.

We also join over 300 child development and early learning experts to express strong concerns about the validity, reliability, and potential consequences of the new testing system currently being implemented administratively in Head Start. High-quality assessments for young children can be important tools in early learning settings, and the various evaluations and screenings currently required in Head Start programs perform valuable functions in diagnosing children's needs, informing curriculum and instruction, and measuring the effectiveness of services. Although we agree that accountability in each Head Start program is critical to ensuring that children are prepared for school, we are troubled by plans to implement a standardized test in all Head Start programs for every 4- and 5- year-old beginning this fall.

The misuse of poorly-designed and implemented assessments for young children must be avoided at all costs. The National Research Council's *Eager To Learn* report warns of the potential to misuse standardized tests for young children. Few early childhood teachers receive the training or support needed to understand and implement a standardized assessment of a child's development. Validity and reliability is of the utmost importance. Any assessment within Head Start should be closely aligned to all the important aspects of a child's development. Concentrating only on pre-reading or numeracy skills will not give an accurate picture of a child's school readiness or a Head Start program's quality.

We urge you to immediately suspend current plans to proceed with the wide-scale assessment of all Head Start children this fall, until Congress has an opportunity to resolve the issue of assessment in the context of this year's reauthorization and consider the implications for Head Start children. We believe the Department's timeline to begin testing this fall will compromise Head Start's quality and preempt consideration of Congressional and other proposals to improve the program during the reauthorization process. In addition, we urge you to consult further with the National Research Council and other assessment experts on the development of the Head Start Reporting System.

On a related critical issue, we strongly support the goal of strengthening the cognitive aspects of Head Start, but we believe that adjusting Head Start's curriculum to accurately reflect best practices for child development can be accomplished without moving the program to the Department of Education, as President Bush proposes. Head Start's approach to social, emotional and physical development must not be compromised, and this costly shift would not serve children well at this time.

Finally, if we are serious about increasing the number of children who enter kindergarten ready to learn, we need to expand access to Head Start. The Administration's proposed FY 2004 budget for Head Start is barely enough to maintain services for children already enrolled in the program, and is not adequate to expand the number children served by Head Start. Access to Head Start's services is critical to giving our nation's most underprivileged children the school readiness skills they need to succeed. At a minimum, we urge you to increase funding for Head Start by \$1 billion next year and put the program on a path to full-funding over the next 10 years.

We appreciate your consideration of our views, and we look forward to working with you in this year's reauthorization to strengthen and improve Head Start.

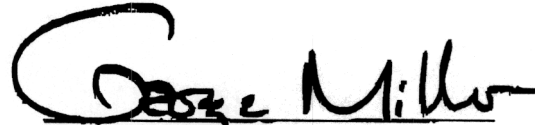


EDWARD M. KENNEDY
United States Senator

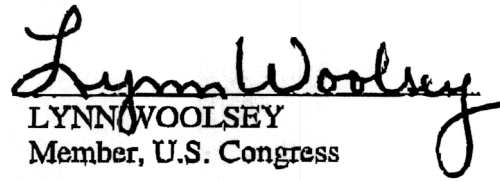


CHRISTOPHER DODD
United States Senator

Sincerely,



GEORGE MILLER
Member, U.S. Congress



LYNN WOOLSEY
Member, U.S. Congress

cc: The Honorable George W. Bush
The Honorable Roderick R. Paige
The Honorable Wade F. Horn